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ABSTRACT

The New York University Symposium on Urban Community Colleges examined the distinctions between urban and non-urban community colleges, the role of urban community colleges in linking high schools and universities and in promoting local economic development, and methods of identifying and developing leaders for these institutions. No definitive picture of the institution emerged during the symposium deliberations, though many participants focused their comments on those community colleges serving urban areas characterized by ethnically diverse populations living on the margins of American society. Many participants linked the colleges' identity to the economic and political problems of inner-city life, citing problems such as precarious social environs and the inequities suffered by many urban minorities. Many asserted that traditional curriculum designs and instructional methods are inadequate responses to the needs of inner-city students, and various avenues for instructional reform were proposed. Barriers to reform, such as limited fiscal resources, lack of expertise, and the institutional culture itself, were discussed. Hopes for the development of a more flexible internal culture led to discussions of the education and desired characteristics of future college leaders. University graduate programs in community college leadership were criticized for focusing on administrative processes rather than educational purposes, perennial problems and issues, professional integrity, networking, and the social and historical context of the community college. Another major problem is the perceived reluctance of many faculty members and middle managers to take on leadership responsibilities. The issue of community and social service as a corollary to instructional effectiveness emerged throughout these discussions, as participants expressed a range of opinions on colleges' involvement in the amelioration of local economic and social conditions. (MAB)

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Illinois State University

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What features of the institutional mission distinguish urban community colleges from community colleges in non-urban settings? The New York University symposium began with a discussion of this question and moved on into an examination of the roles urban community colleges play as links between high schools and universities and as contributors to local economic development. The symposium concluded with a discussion of leadership development, examining the desired qualifications of those who head urban community colleges and considering the steps that can be taken to identify, educate, and encourage future deans and presidents.

No definitive picture of the institution emerged during the symposium deliberations. While some participants argued that a distinctive institutional type called the "urban community college" can be identified, others took a different stance, suggesting that it would be more accurate to speak of "community colleges in urban settings" and that the problems faced by these institutions are shared by open-access institutions in general. For example, when asked to describe the urban community college, many participants noted its commitment to addressing the problems of a relatively poor and politically disenfranchised

constituency. But others noted that community colleges serving poor rural areas face equally difficult challenges. And still others pointed out that colleges in urban settings are themselves diverse in terms of the socioeconomic characteristics of their service districts and the relative emphasis placed on various components of the comprehensive community college mission (collegiate education, career education, and community service).

Regardless of their stand on this definitional issue, many participants focused their comments on those community colleges serving urban areas characterized by ethnically diverse populations living on the margins of American society, both politically and economically. Distinctions between urban and suburban institutions that serve middle-class communities and those that serve the inner-city poor were implied throughout the discussions, with attention paid predominantly to the latter and to what one participant called the "pathology" of the inner city. Though numerous points concerning these institutions were raised, they can be subsumed into at least four questions:

- What challenges do urban poverty and racial issues pose for those who lead these inner-city colleges?
- In the face of these challenges, how adequate are the colleges' instructional programs and what are the barriers to instructional reform?
- What is required to prepare the next generation of leaders for urban community colleges?
- What is the appropriate balance between the community service and academic roles played by the colleges?

The "Pathology" of the Urban Community

Many symposium participants linked the college's identity to the economic and political problems of inner-city life. According to this view, the inner-city colleges are for and of the disadvantaged communities they serve, driven by a mission to help the urban poor while at the same sharing the inequities that create urban poverty in the first place. The result is an institution characterized by a sense that it must carry a disproportionately difficult educational burden with a disproportionately small share of societal resources.

Several features of the urban college were cited as evidence of its educational burden. One lies in the colleges' precarious social environs. The president of one urban college noted that her institution differed from suburban colleges in that it functioned on an elemental level as a physical safe haven from a dangerous community, providing a place where students could escape urban crime. The alienation of ethnically diverse city populations from the predominantly white, middle-class mainstream was also cited as a unique challenge. One participant cited research indicating that inner-city youths find it difficult to envision life beyond their immediate surroundings and hence do not buy into education as a long-term investment in a better life. Another participant who had served as a president at both inner-city and suburban colleges noted that students in the latter find it easier to mainstream themselves into university life after transfer than students in the former. She also argued

that the stakes for these inner-city students are higher than the stakes for students at suburban institutions. A distinguishing feature of inner-city colleges, she maintained, is that its students "stand between hope and despair," implying that the price of academic failure is continued poverty.

Some participants saw these problems as an extension of racial politics, arguing that an understanding of urban colleges requires an understanding of the inequities suffered by many urban minorities. One participant noted that "urban community colleges function in a context [that has] been abandoned by the [federal government]. The blacker they [the cities] have become, the more they have been allowed to deteriorate." Others made similar comments, pointing out the cultural and economic gap between the urban community college's constituency and the people who hold political power. As a result, the colleges "are not funded in ways that reflect the need to respond to homelessness, [lack of] day care" and other factors that impede the college's ability to provide educational offerings. A more insidious outcome is the skepticism with which the white mainstream views the educational quality of inner-city community colleges. Some participants suggested that this skepticism mitigates against opportunities for transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Thus the colleges are doubly obligated to document educational outcomes.

The Instructional Program and Academic Leadership

The inner-city college was also portrayed as an institution on the receiving end of troubled school systems that share the inequities of urban life and that turn out students who often lack requisite academic skills. Some participants noted that problems with academic skills are compounded for the large number of immigrants who have a limited command of the English language. Thus the colleges were described not simply as extensions of the educational continuum, but as "recuperative" institutions that tend to the gaps in the students' past education.

Given this difficult educational responsibility, many asserted that traditional curriculum designs and instructional methods are inadequate responses to the needs of inner-city students. Several avenues for instructional reform were placed on the table. Some participants urged a shift from process to outcomes, citing military training programs, private sector educational initiatives, and college contract programs as models of "customer-driven, results-oriented" approaches that place a premium on student mastery of skills rather than on the accumulation of credits. Others drew on the example of the Upward Bound program, arguing that efforts to articulate community colleges with high schools and universities are ineffective without support groups and other student services that help students (particularly minority males) bridge the gap between the culture of academe and the culture of local communities that may not reinforce the value of educational

advancement. Finally, some questioned predominant modes of remediation, arguing that mandatory placement in remedial courses might be abandoned in favor of a mainstreaming approach that supplements multiple formats of content area instruction with basic skills assistance. The emphasis here was on the perceived need to shift institutional focus from screening students at entry to assuring that all who enter the college leave with the skills and knowledge expected of the college-educated.

Do the colleges have the capacity to effect instructional reforms? Many participants conceded that limited fiscal resources would stand in the way of extensive change. In addition, some argued that the expertise needed to make reforms (such as restructuring remedial programs) has yet to be developed.

Barriers within the institutional culture itself were also noted. While some participants cited flexibility in responding to emerging community needs as a distinguishing characteristic of community colleges generally, many nonetheless expressed concern for an internal rigidity that works against the best interests of inner-city students. Some pointed to the cultural differences between a predominantly white faculty and a predominantly minority student body, arguing that some faculty are slow to understand the needs of their students and are reluctant to hold them to high academic standards. Others expressed frustration with a perceived faculty reluctance to change instructional methods. As one participant put it, "we have a faculty-driven

curriculum rather than a needs-driven curriculum that is best exemplified in the colleges' contracted education programs." While some disagreed with this image of teacher recalcitrance, many left the impression that leaders effecting instructional reform must develop strategies to motivate the faculty toward new ways of approaching their work with students.

Leadership Development

Hopes for the development of a more flexible internal culture led into discussions of the education and desired characteristics of future college leaders. University graduate programs in community college leadership were criticized for focusing on administrative processes rather than educational purposes and the capacity to create and build support for a viable institutional mission. Mindful of these broader goals, one university professor suggested that each graduate program serving community college educators should:

1/ help students recognize and take informed stands on the intractable problems and perennial issues in education;

2/ provide a model of scholastic and professional integrity;

3/ connect students with a network of practitioners through internships and participation in conferences;

4/ insist on widespread reading in history, biography, anthropology, and other disciplines that frame the institutional context of the community college; and

5/ have a focus within itself (such as research, multi-cultural education, or any other special emphasis).

The role of current presidents in identifying and encouraging future leaders, especially among minorities and the faculty, was also discussed. Despite some overall skepticism toward faculty, one participant argued that "faculty are ready for leadership" and that presidents have a responsibility to break down "stereotypes of faculty-administrator relationships," thereby making teachers full partners in planning needed change. In addition, the participants recognized that university programs designed specifically for community college educators are relatively small in number and do not play a role in the training of all college leaders. Hence sitting presidents have an obligation to take responsibility for leadership development within their own institutions. They cannot leave these tasks to the university alone.

A major problem cited by the participants, however, is the perceived reluctance of many faculty members and middle managers to take on leadership responsibilities in the first place. Some symposium participants noted that the daunting fiscal, cultural, and political challenges of urban college leadership cause otherwise talented individuals to shy away from the presidency. Unless universities and community college presidents actively seek out and encourage potential leaders, rather than passively waiting for these leaders to emerge on their own, the profession may unwittingly deprive itself of needed leadership talent.

Community Service

The issue of community and social service as a corollary to instructional effectiveness emerged throughout these discussions. To what extent should colleges involve themselves in the amelioration of local economic and social conditions that might impede student participation and success in college? Those who saw the urban community college through the lens of racial politics in an inequitable society viewed the mission in terms of political activism. For example, one president described his institution as a politically-engaged college that works jointly with community agencies for local economic renewal and that is concerned as much with the "empowerment" of students as it is with job training or transfer education. Others took a more conservative view, suggesting that the foundation of "empowerment" is in education itself and that community and social services should be undertaken only as a means of furthering the educational mission.

Though no consensus was reached concerning the respective roles of instruction and community service, some argued that urban colleges, more than other institutions, face a difficult job in striking a balance between these two mission components. One president observed that the exigencies of the urban environment placed considerable pressure on college leaders to move funds from the "core" instructional programs to services that are "on the periphery." This issue was particularly notable in discussions of the college role in career education and

economic development. Some argued that the success of college job training programs depended on institutional efforts to work with community agencies in boosting the local economy, thereby assuring that program graduates will find employment. Others doubted the efficacy of this tactic, suggesting that greater benefit might be derived by investing in instructional programs that provide students with the skills and education needed to escape the community in search of a better life.

An underlying theme in this discussion was the question of whether an institution structured as a social service agency dedicated to the uplift of entire communities can simultaneously act as an academic institution meeting the needs of individuals who seek educational advancement. One participant suggested that the social service or welfare agenda, taken to an extreme, may lead an institution "to surrender many of the elements of schooling" that are essential to the college's role as an agent of individual mobility. Its academic posture may be neglected as noneducative functions become central.

Future Avenues of Investigation

The commentary generated during the symposium revealed what one participant called the "conflicting values" that underlie most discussions of community college education. For example, calls for the academic rigor implied in the "customer-driven, results-oriented" models of contract education or private sector training were matched by calls for a nurturing college

environment that is open to all comers and that attends to the personal needs of the individual. Similarly, concern for the efficacy of the urban community college as an academic institution linking high schools and universities was matched by concern for the college as an agency working toward the political and economic empowerment of local communities. While the dichotomous roles in each of the above examples may not be mutually exclusive in all instances, they suggest the fundamental choices college leaders face in shaping and explaining the institutional mission given limited public resources.

Future studies of the urban community college could help illuminate the nature of the institution by examining the decisions college leaders make in balancing these roles. How do the colleges manifest themselves as community service agencies? As academic institutions along more traditional lines? Are some colleges (and their leaders) more oriented toward one paradigm than the other? If so, what are the consequences in terms of student outcomes, such as transfer? Is there a trade-off between investment in community service on the one hand and institutional capacity to serve as collegiate institutions in the continuum of urban higher education on the other?

Studies structured around these questions are not easy to operationalize. But they may lead to a greater understanding of the educational diversity of community colleges in urban areas, positing the institutions not as a homogeneous institutional type to be compared to colleges in suburban or rural categories, but

as entities that have developed a variety of approaches to common problems. Insights into what those approaches are and how they affect urban students seeking educational advancement will help current and future community college leaders make appropriate responses to the challenges of urban life.